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Environmentalists concerned about pollution from Nevada mines

By BRENDAN RILEY - ASSOCIATED PRESS

CARSON CITY, Nev. (AP) - State officials said Thursday they're moving ahead with rules governing mercury pollution from Nevada mines despite claims from environmentalists and others that the rules would do little to stop the worst polluters.

"This is one step. We are not stopping here," Mike Elges, chief of the state Bureau of Air Pollution Control, said during the first workshop on the rules. "We're not sidestepping these other issues."

Jennifer Carr, head of the state Bureau of Air Quality Planning, said the plan is to have the rules ready for adoption by the state Environmental Commission in late January or early February.

Carr added that while the mining industry has been working with the state in developing the rules, "they're not necessarily pro-industry. There will be significant capital expenditures" by mines in complying with the standards.

Glenn Miller, a University of Nevada environmental scientist, said the proposed rules should be revised prior to adoption because they fall short in controlling emission sources and in assessing health risks from mercury.

Miller also said the state's budget for a new monitoring program is only \$250,000, which means "a very minimal amount of staff time" for checking Nevada gold mines, the main source of the mercury pollution. Carr said the money will pay for two staffers and a car.

Elyssa Rosen of Great Basin Mine Watch said the proposed rules would allow mercury emissions to continue at current levels in a state "which has the worst mercury pollution in the West."

Jan Gilbert of the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada said adequate air monitoring is inexpensive and feasible, adding the state shouldn't be more concerned with costs incurred by a wealthy industry than "with the risks to our families."

Other critics included Tina Nappe of the Sierra Club and Darlene Luster, a Reno nurse who works with children. Luster said that in her work she has seen "the life sentence children bear from neurological damage."

The critics cited a National Institute of Health study in 2005 that showed that up to 637,000 of the 4 million children born in the United States each year have been exposed to mercury above the EPA's safety level. They added scientists have linked mercury to autism.

Rosen also said scientists have reported that air currents likely carry Nevada mercury emissions downwind to Idaho, Utah, Colorado, Wyoming and possibly other states. She added new studies show some of the highest levels of mercury ever measured in Utah's Great Salt Lake.

John Mudge of Newmont Mining Corp. termed the proposed rules "a big step," adding the industry "started a few years ago with a voluntary program and now it's evolving into a regulatory program - and I suspect as time goes on other things will be added."

Mudge, a leader in Nevada mining industry efforts to deal with the mercury emissions, added, "It's not necessarily something we had to support - but we think it's the right thing to do."

"We will have some rigorous monitoring and record-keeping. We will have a permit system," Mudge said, adding, "A lot of people would say this is really a strong program."

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